Catering for student diversity

In designing assessments there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account. One important factor relates to the diversity of our students. It is important to reflect on the nature of our student cohort when planning for effective group work - we need to plan for how we might structure the group experience so that the diversity of our student population is valued, respected and catered for. Diversity within a group is sometimes viewed as an obstacle or challenge, but it can also be an effective resource that can enrich the group experience.

International vs Local (English speaking background vs NESB), Age and experience

Our student cohort is becoming increasingly diverse. This includes not only greater diversity in terms of international students, but also much greater diversity of our local students as well.

One common misconception is that international students, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds may be uncomfortable undertaking group work. However, this is not supported by research (see for example Asmar, 2002; Biggs 1997; Kennedy, 2002; Volet & Ang, 1998; Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999; Volet, 1999). Indeed, the evidence shows that international students have a preference for collaborative learning. Therefore the presence of a diverse group of students is no reason not to include group work in the unit of study. Significantly, if one aim of the group work is to prepare students for future work then it becomes even more important to consider aspects of diversity.

However, it is recognised that there may be reluctance from students to be involved in groups made up from people from different cultures. So if a key criterion of the assessment is that students develop skills in working in diverse groups, then the required make up of groups needs to be explicit. This of course does not just involve diversity based on culture or country of origin but will also include diversity of age, experience, gender, background and thought.

Student degree level: undergraduate vs postgraduate

While there are differences between undergraduate and postgraduate studies one element that may be similar for students in both groups is that students are in the first year of their studies. We should not assume that students will have developed the discipline of independently organising their study simply because they are at university. For instance, first year undergraduates may have a sense of newfound freedom at university, whilst new postgraduate students may be anxious because they have been away from formal study for a length of time. Therefore, perhaps more structure and guidance in developing group work learning environments and skills is required for introductory units of study. This is perhaps especially true for first-year undergraduates who have come out of a school environment that has advocated individual work and competitiveness.
As well as similarities there are also some subtle differences which may need to be taken into account, especially the degree of exposure students may have to the work environment. Postgraduate students may have had greater exposure to work environments and many will be part time students in full time employment, whereas undergraduates may not have similar workplace exposure or experience. Therefore if the group work assessment requires students to have access to, or knowledge of the workplace, then this aspect of the task needs to be carefully designed (perhaps with back up options). This type of group work may be strengthened by forming heterogenous groups.

**Full-time vs Part-time**

Students, especially mature age and part time students, may find it difficult to meet outside of class time due to work, family, travel or other commitments. Many full time students also have heavy work commitments on top of their full time study load and as well, many students have university timetables that may clash with the timetables of their group members. Therefore it is important to reflect on the likely make-up of students in your unit of study. If there are likely to be many part-time students, then it may be necessary to design group work tasks that can be undertaken in or around class time or online. It may also mean structuring classes so as to accommodate group work meetings for students. The upside of assisting students by allocating time within class will make monitoring and informally assessing groups easier and will give students the opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions.